

Story 1474 (1989 Tape 9)

Narrator: Ramazan Avcı, 38,
barber, Kurdish

Location: Hıyarlık village,
Kahta kaza,
Adıyaman Province

Date: May 1989

An Hour in the Presence of Allah¹

As we all know, Behlül² was the brother of Harun Reşit, one of the great leaders of Islam.³ Although many people of that time thought that Behlül was crazy, he was in fact a very intelligent man with great wisdom. Often, however, nobody could understand him very well. He used to say, "An hour in the presence of Allah is like a thousand ordinary hours," but no one, even Harun Reşit, took his words seriously.

In those old days the Friday noon service⁴ was considered

¹As Behlül says in the first paragraph, "An hour in the presence of Allah is like a thousand ordinary hours." There are different wordings of this idea, and they are sometimes applied in different ways. Two verses in the Biblical Book of Psalms provide very early examples of this. "A day in Thy court is better than a thousand" (Psalms, LXXXIV, 10). And "A thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night" (Psalms, LXXXV, 4).

²The narrator pronounces this name Balil, which may be influenced by the Arabic Buhlül.

³Harun Reşit (also Haroun al-Raschid), who flourished around the year 800 A.D., was one of the most powerful and well known of the Caliphs. He is known to many people in the West primarily in the fictional role he played in the Arabian Nights. Whatever historicity may be claimed for Behlül Dane, there is no evidence that he was the mad brother or half brother of the great Abbasid Caliph.

⁴Friday was the Moslem sabbath day, and the high point of the Moslem religious week. Since the founding of the Republic,

Story 1474

to be so important that it was often led by the Caliph Harun Reşit himself. One Friday morning Harun Reşit was preparing for that service by taking his ritual ablutions, but his ablutions were different from those of most people because he took them not before a fountain of flowing water but in his private pool.⁵ While Harun Reşit was doing this, Behlül came along riding on a stick as if it were a horse, in the way that children do. Behlül said, "O Harun, an hour in the presence of Allah is like a thousand ordinary hours

"Hah! Our crazy man has started talking again," answered Harun Reşit. He did not believe anything that Behlül said.

But when Behlül touched his brother with his stick and shouted, "Ya, Allah!" Harun Reşit discovered himself to be a naked woman on the bank of a river. Frightened and confused, he said to himself, "Aman!"⁶ I am not really a woman! I am Harun Reşit! But what am I going to do now?" A short while Sunday has been the day of rest and the cessation of all business in Turkey, but devout Moslems in Turkey still consider Friday their sabbath.

⁵Abdest is the word for the ritual ablutions taken before prayer services. These ablutions consist in part in bathing three times one's hands, feet, face, eyes, ears, and nose. But the narrator here calls the Harun's ablutions boy aptes, by which he means total immersion and bathing of the whole body.

⁶Commonly used mild epithet which negatively may mean Alas! and positively may be considered the equivalent of Wow! or golly!

Story 1474

later a shepherd came to the river to water his flock. When shepherd saw a naked woman on the bank, he covered her nakedness with a coat and took her home with him

The shepherd's mother asked, "Son, where did you find this woman? Who is she?"

"I found her by the river, Mother. She told me that she river girl."⁷

Harun Reşit, who had been transformed into a woman, was soon married to the shepherd. Harun Reşit lived with this shepherd for several years and bore him three children. But one day when he went to the edge of the river to do the family laundry, he heard the voice of Behlül again saying, "Ya, Allah!" and he suddenly found himself back in his pool taking his ablutions ⁸

Harun Reşit said, "Oh, Behlül, I now believe your words. It is true that an hour in the presence of Allah is like a thousand ordinary hours!"

⁷Sea and river nymphs appear occasionally in Turkish lore as well as in the lore of other peoples. A water nymph plays a significant role in the 10th-century Turkish epic The Book of Dede Korkut.

⁸This displacement of time, in which in a few seconds one seems to experience years of activity, is a universal motif that is especially common in Turkish folktales. It is often referred to as Zaman Zaman İçinde (Time within Time).